

RELATING TO STUDENTS FROM EAST ASIA

East Asian Worldview

All the major world religions - Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism and Buddhism originate in Asia. It is a very religious place. It may be helpful to compare Asian and Western ideas and approaches to life and religion, so that as we talk to students from East Asia, we can be aware of their mindset and our own presuppositions.

If the East looks to Buddha, Confucius and the Tao, the West looks back to Aristotle, the Greeks, and "logos". Aristotle pre-dated the Christian background of the West, and firmly established the habit of logical thinking, proceeding from cause and effect, and following through on an argument. Just as most Westerners know little in detail about Aristotle and Plato, so most East Asians may know little detail about Confucius etc. Nevertheless we are all deeply influenced by the philosophical roots of our cultures.

Traditionally, Asian thinking does not necessarily try to reason from one proposition to another. Rather, it tries to see the universe as a whole, feeling that the human task is not so much to *understand* the universe as to *relate to it* as it is. Reality is all one. In some ways this seems quite close to pantheism. Moreover, broadly speaking, Westerners are more ideological in their approach to truth/right and Asians are more pragmatic.

Here are a few generalisations (which may not be true of every individual):

1. The West wants to explain everything and use it, while the East is more concerned to see everything in its right place and relate to it. E.g. Chinese art, where different themes are seen in their relationship to each other, and wants to view the whole, not just one individual viewpoint.

2. The West tends to compartmentalise things and analyse them separately. E.g. separation of church and state in the US Constitution. A Chinese person would usually take state control of religion for granted.

3. The West is extremely individualistic - we tend to see the individual as over against the world, and not as an integral part of the whole.

The Asian viewpoint starts with the whole, and comes to the individual at the end of the line. Westerners are very proud of democracy. But in Asia the individual has not until recently been conceived of as an autonomous entity who casts his (let alone her!) vote and influences society. He/she is simply a part of the whole who needs to fit in to the whole. The governors are the ones who determine where he/she fits.

4. Since the Enlightenment, we have given up any belief in ghosts, fairies and goblins. But many other people and many Asians still believe in a kind of middle world between heaven and hell, inhabited by spirits and ghosts, which may be either good, bad or neutral.

5. Westerners pay very little attention to their ancestors. For many Asians, paying attention to the ancestors is a way of expressing and keeping family values and traditions. To break with the ancestors is not just to break up family traditions, but is also to break your worldview, and a chain of relationships with the whole world that has gone on for thousands of years.

6. To many Asian people, sin is seen not so much as a moral offence as the breach of a code of custom. We know that a person cannot be convicted of sin until he/she realises that there is a creator God who is holy. So we probably need to explain about who God is before we start talking about sin. Many Asians think that by "sin", we mean a criminal offence.

Asian culture tends to be more shame oriented, while western culture tends to be more guilt oriented.

7. Asian courtesy is real, and tends to inculcate humility, and make self-assertiveness repugnant. If you are just an insignificant cog in this universe, bound by your karma, you do not go around asserting yourself and your own views as if they were important. Rather you try to fit in with the greater reality.

Christians put a lot of emphasis on prayer, and say that "prayer changes things", and causes things to happen. Traditional Asian religion places the emphasis on meditation. By meditating, the person absorbs in him/herself the sense of reality in the whole universe, and does not try to change anything, but accepts reality.

8. Asians are very concerned to try to achieve or maintain balance and harmony in relationships and in the universe. They sometimes wonder at Western emphasis on independence and assertiveness – behaviours sometimes associated with immaturity back home.

So, Asian life and decision making tends to be far more family, group and clan-centred. Money decisions, decisions regarding marriage and education and work and living tend to be taken for the benefit of the group, rather than for the individual. (eg Where not everyone can take up opportunities it may be a group decision as to who in the family gets the chance to go to university or to study English in the UK. Those who benefit from these opportunities will then have ongoing reciprocal responsibilities to the whole family.)

When someone is deciding whether or not to follow Christ, they will think through the family and group implications of that decision. As we talk to Asians, we need to be aware of their family situation and commitments. One might think that the only way an Asian person will become a Christian is to imbibe individualism and make the decision for their own good without being hampered by family considerations, but this need not be the case. An "Asian way" of coming to the same conclusion is by considering the long term blessings to one's family (how else will they ever come to salvation?) and by recognising one's rightful response to their heavenly Father. An Asian student's strong family ties aren't simply a hindrance to their coming to faith, but can also be an opportunity to reach their whole family and not just that student.

Some tips for relating to East Asian students

1. Remember that although many East Asian students might struggle to express themselves in English and seem reticent or diffident to us, in their own culture and language, they are often self-confident and influential. To be studying in the UK, their families are well-off and/or they have won coveted scholarships.
2. Asians are taught to respect older people and those in authority, and to acknowledge people's position in society. In Asia, the pastor will be called "Rev. Wong" and not just "Bob". An older sister will be called "Older Sister" or "Second Sister" rather than by name. If there's one seat in the room, it will go to the oldest person there.

Students will follow your lead to a large extent, so if you tell them to call you by name they probably will, and if you treat them informally and as a friend they will respond, at least to some degree. If you are much older than an Asian student, you can still have a close relationship with them, but probably as a mentor or uncle/aunt.

3. An Asian "no" is not necessarily a no and an Asian "yes" is not necessarily a yes. Asian students often don't want to risk offending or disappointing the person they are talking to, and will try to give you the answer they think you want to hear, as a way of expressing their desire to continue the relationship harmoniously and to save face (your face).

If you want a true answer, try giving the student two viable options. For e.g., instead of saying "Would you like to come to church with me on Sunday? Please, please come!", say something like "Would you like to come to church with me on Sunday? It'd be great if you can come. Or would you prefer to come another time?".

4. Many students from Korea, Hong Kong and Taiwan have already heard about Christianity, although they may not have understood the Christian message or read the Bible for themselves. Going to a bible study in the UK, where they are encouraged to ask difficult questions and aren't pressured to make a commitment could be an opportunity they appreciate.
5. In Bible studies, Asian students may be quite quiet. This could be because schools (and sometimes even churches) in Asia don't often encourage discussion and questions. Instead, the teacher lectures and the students take notes. With sufficient encouragement, students can become more and more participative and really relish the interaction, however, don't be too worried if they speak less than you expect. It doesn't mean they're not engaged/learning.
6. Most East Asian students will not relish a debate about controversial, emotionally charged political or religious topics. If a student seems uncomfortable about giving his opinion on something, don't keep pressing them. And if they do venture a view that you disagree with, be tactful in your disagreement.
7. Food is very important to East Asians and is a great bridge builder – having students over for a meal, being open to try their food, asking about their food, etc, is a way of showing love.
8. Joking with students does really break the ice. However, British humour can be quite hard to understand, so do be careful that your sarcasm isn't taken literally. Consider sign posting for their sake by saying things like "I'm only joking."
9. Asian friends tend to spend more time with each other and share more deeply about their thoughts and feelings than is the norm in British culture. This could explain why East Asians sometimes think their friendships with British people are superficial and why the British sometimes find East Asian friends a little clingy/intrusive. Long term, this isn't a problem as both parties get to know each other and make accommodations for each other's cultural background.

Some common misconceptions and barriers to faith

1. Christianity/religion is not scientific.
2. The Bible is just a fable; the narratives are not historical accounts.
3. I can add Christianity to my other beliefs. I can use the Christian God for my own ends.
4. Christianity is a Western religion. All Europeans are Christians.
5. My family will not approve. I will hurt/disappoint/betray them if I become a Christian.
6. None of my friends are Christians. I'd be striking out on my own.
7. I haven't experienced it so I can't know it's true.
8. Christians are scary and judgmental.
9. Lack of understanding - what is God, holy, sin, faith, truth, etc.

Communicating the Gospel – some ideas for connecting with the heart

1. God is our heavenly Father, to whom we owe our very lives, but we have rejected his love and provision. E.g., The parable of the lost son (Also, only Jesus is the perfect filial son)
2. God is our most rightful authority, whom we have rebelled against. We can expect his wrath if we continue to flout his rule. E.g., parable of the wicked tenants, Rom 1:18ff
3. Salvation can be understood as restoring a broken relationship (with the one most important being), bringing peace/harmony where there was enmity/alienation. 2 Cor 5:18-20, Eph 2:12-14, Col 1:21-22, Rom 5:1-2, 10-11
4. Understanding the gospel in terms of our shame/disgrace (as well as our guilt) – Gen 2:25, Dt 32:5, Rom 10:11, Heb 12:2/13:13, 1 Pet 2:6

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